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# Random Ramblings - Patron-Driven Acquisitions, eBooks, and Economic Self-Interest

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# Random Ramblings — Patron-Driven Acquisitions, eBooks, and Economic Self-Interest

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What is the appropriate role of economic self-interest in collection development? The quick answer most likely depends upon your type of library. Patron-Driven Acquisitions (PDA) is based upon the premise that academic libraries should focus their purchases upon materials immediately needed by their users in these times of economic stress. The availability of digital resources, print-on-demand, and the out-of-print book market makes it possible to acquire most materials just-in-time rather than the old model of stockpiling resources just-in-case. While this model reduces the number of current purchases, the advocates of PDA contend that they are not responsible for the economic well being of publishers and that publishers need to find ways to change their business model to meet the new economic realities.

Economic self-interest is being viewed much differently by public librarians. The big publishers who get most of their revenue from retail sales are taking advantage of the licensing of eBooks to change the way they deal with both libraries and bookstores to further their economic self-interest. From refusing to sell eBooks to libraries to requiring repurchase after a certain number of uses, these publishers are making fundamental changes to increase profits. They contend that they don't have any obligation to libraries if they can make more money by selling more books to readers who would have otherwise borrowed them for free. Public libraries and the **American Library Association** are trying to push back to force the publishers to sell these eBooks to libraries, but copyright law gives publishers the right to sell to whomever they please. In the old business model, the first sale doctrine would have given libraries workarounds for physical content; but electronic licensing changes all that.

I contend that economic self-interest should induce librarians and publishers to look beyond immediate economic benefits to consider long-term goals. For academic libraries, I'm focusing on university presses as a key part of the scholarly communication process. Not buying university press titles as they come out will create financial hardships unless the press has a strong backlist to generate revenues. If an academic library stops buying a high proportion of university press titles, the library saves money. Within the larger university community, however, faculty who need to publish a book for tenure will have fewer possibilities of finding a press willing to publish excellent scholarship that won't sell through PDA. The individual decisions make sense for the library, but the collective decisions of all libraries have the potential to impact negatively faculty at all institutions. I have no idea if faculty will figure this out, but they may not feel kindly toward

their own library if they do. As an aside, I strongly support some way to create an open access alternative to the tenure book that is based upon an honest and scrupulous review.

University presses can also push back individually and collectively. Nothing would stop a press from selling all its titles, now preferred in digital format, as a package at a reasonable per title price while charging a higher price for individual institutional purchases, for example, \$100, \$200, or perhaps even more. They also don't have to agree to allow their titles to be included in the library catalog for PDA purchases. The serial publishers had institutional subscription prices long before the arrival of digital documents. If libraries buy books according to their economic self-interest, why shouldn't university presses sell them according to the same principle? Their commercial publishing colleagues certainly don't have any scruples.

My final point will be more controversial. Establishing the principle that academic libraries evaluate their actions according to economic self-interest opens up the possibility that their host institutions will do the same in evaluating the academic library. I worry about the future of academic libraries with the arrival of Google, the decreased importance of reference, faculty buying their own books, and the growing numbers of online students who are much harder to convince to use library services. The Internet favors disintermediation. I'm not sure what I would say to an administrator who proposed on the grounds of the institution's economic self-interest that another unit could purchase and support the databases that the faculty select and that the faculty might as well purchase what they want (PDA) without library intervention. The level of service for some would certainly not be the same, but it might be good enough and have enough economic justification to be implemented. To avoid this scenario, I believe that libraries need to nurture support and create good feelings among its constituencies as most academic libraries have done in the past. Doing so individually and collectively might require blunting the focus on economic self-interest in some cases or at least hiding this principle well enough that others don't have reason to use it against the academic library.

The situation for public libraries is different because they are suffering from having some major trade publishers act in what they believe to be their economic self-interest. If these publishers are willing to walk away from sales to libraries, estimated at 9% of their total sales, public libraries have little direct leverage to change this decision. For public libraries, the first strategy would be to challenge the publishers' assumptions that library lending

hurts their profitability. Perhaps the research already exists or could be commissioned to provide some proof for the reasons commonly given on why libraries don't harm publishers and may even benefit them. To begin, an argument can be made that high library circulation can co-exist with high publisher sales. A guest lecturer to my collection development class, **Celeste Choate**, showed figures that both public library circulation and book sales are among the highest in the nation in Ann Arbor. While this campus community may be atypical, perhaps further research would show that high library use and book buying are linked. A second point is that the availability of books in libraries doesn't detract from sales as much as publishers believe because library users wouldn't have bought the book anyway. Contrary to the argument above, some library users most likely don't buy many full-priced books out of principle or due to the lack of money. The literature on copyright infringement is filled with analysis that the number of "stolen" copies of music or films does not translate into the dollar value of lost sales because the "thieves" wouldn't have bought the stolen content. A third contention is that libraries are more likely to purchase relatively unknown authors, especially those who have received good reviews in the library press. Increasing the readership of these authors makes them better known and may ultimately translate into higher sales and profits for publishers. With the Amazon long tail, this argument perhaps makes less sense than it used to but may still have some validity.

Economic self-interest does create some allies for public libraries. If the commercial publisher has a library division, these employees have great economic self-interest in selling to libraries since the existence of their division is at stake as print sales decline. The library jobbers have the same self-interest of wanting to sell as many eBooks as possible to their customers. Their desire to put pressure on publishers may not be quite as strong since public libraries may not have reduced their purchases from them but are rather spending the acquisitions budget on other materials.

The final strategy for public libraries is to publicize this self-serving economic strategy on the part of commercial publishers. The public still has a favorable view of libraries and may be able to apply some pressure on these "greedy" publishers. In addition, some want to borrow the books at their local public library. The letter from **Maureen Sullivan**, ALA President, to the publishers is a good example of implementing this strategy. Public librarians should tell their patrons why the library doesn't have the eBooks that they wish to borrow and

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suggest that they complain. Library associations at all levels and individual libraries should take their case to the press. They, along with their patrons, should use social media to put pressure on the publishers. Effective lobbying on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube can sometimes produce the desired results. Even talking to politicians at the state level, as was done in Connecticut, increases awareness of the issue even if state laws cannot force publishers to sell to libraries since federal copyright takes precedence over state legislation.

To return to the central idea behind this column, focusing on economic self-interest can have short-term benefits and long-term disadvantages in collection development as well as in life. I tell my collection development classes that libraries should realize that vendors need to make a profit to stay in business and that their staying in business helps libraries by providing competition and multiple service options. This principle, like most, has limits. Sometimes vendor profits are excessive. Sometimes a library is in desperate enough financial circumstances to look only at short-term economic benefits since the library simply won't have a long term without doing so. On the other hand, in this time of rapid change and uncertainty, the best strategy for libraries, publishers, societies, and vendors is to consider not only the economic benefits for tomorrow but to consider where the organization would like to be economically in the long term. Alienating customers and losing allies for immediate gain is a much more popular model than it used to be, but the old-fashioned principle of looking to the future may still be the wiser economic decision. 🌳